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ABSTRACT

Britain's Further Education Unit (FEU) has been working with numerous individuals and organizations in the further education (FE) sector to develop a common framework for post-14 education and training throughout the nation for the 21st century. The framework proposed by FEU provides for all achievement and awards in FE programs to be described in terms of its component units by using standardized versions of the following specifications: title, learning outcomes statement, assessment criteria, level, unit size, and credit value. The purpose of the proposed common framework for FE is to improve the balance between diversity and coherence and between local flexibility of provision and recognition of national standards. The proposed framework calls for defining and interpreting all units through a combination of the following: succinct written definitions of learning outcomes, exemplars of appropriate performance or products, and networking (through consortia, examiners' meetings, etc.) allowing practitioners to test and develop their common understanding. The FEU believes that incorporating all existing qualifications and provision within a common framework will be much easier than it was to create the British National Curriculum or National Vocational Qualifications and would bring benefits at least as great as both. (MN)

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A Framework For Credit

A common framework for post–14 education and training for the twenty-first century

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PREFACE

This paper draws on existing practice and field trials, but is primarily concerned with outlining a vision for the future to a wide audience.

It forms part of a set of publications related to the Further Education Unit's 'credit framework' developmental activities. The others give more technical advice and, although informed by an overall vision, are aimed at those practitioners engaged with current developments.

The other publications are:

- *Framework Guidelines 1: Levels, Credit Value and the Award of Credits*
- *Framework Guidelines 2: Learning Outcomes, Units and Modules*
- *Unitisation, Modularisation and Flexibility: a credit-based approach*

The development and refinement of the framework and the advice within these proposals is derived from the expertise and involvement of a great many individuals and organisations within the FE sector. It represents the outcomes of various FEU developmental activities, in particular Credit Framework Technical issues (RP770), FEU National CAT Network (RP739) and developments in the Welsh modularisation and credits initiative. It also draws on work in the schools and HE sectors and the activities of many national organisations and agencies concerned with in post-14 education and training.

FEU invites responses to the proposals contained within these publications from r ,tional bodies, education institutions, training providers and others concerned with post-14 education and training.

For further information about these publications and related development work covering framework technical issues (RP770) contact Tony Tait, Project Director, FEU, Citadel Place, Tinworth Street, London SE11 5EH.

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Context

The publication of this paper is intended to support a number of current developments and to help clarify some long-standing issues. These include:

- the need to maximise choice and flexibility post-14, while maintaining coherence and standards;
- the desire for clear information about the performance of providers to aid consumer choice and to promote accountability;
- plans to include a vocational element within 14-16 provision (Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum);
- the encouragement of mixed academic/vocational provision post-16;
- concern about lack of breadth and balance post-16, together with a desire to allow specialisation as appropriate;
- the need to recognise and accredit achievement at work and in less formal situations;
- the need to establish a life-long learning society, and recognition of the needs of adult learners for accreditation and progression;
- improved progression and impartial guidance for both school leavers and adults.

The Further Education Unit believes that it is possible to create a framework which enables all kinds of post-14 achievement to be straightforwardly described in a common language *without* distorting the essential nature of provision which has different aims and origins.

With this framework it becomes more possible for those with a professional interest to engage in constructive debate and to plan effective action. At the same time, those of our citizens who are involved as consumers of education and training, rather than as practitioners in the system, could be given a clearer choice, proper recognition for their achievements, and the increased influence which comes from better understanding.

This paper follows on from earlier FEU publications, (*A Basis for Credit?* 1992, *A Basis for Credit — feedback and developments*, 1993, *Discussing Credit*, 1993.) and links with two other reports issued recently:

Choosing to Change (June 1994) the report of a Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) project which advocates a national credit framework for higher education (HE) and further education (FE) with a common credit currency converging, in time, around the proposals of FEU;[1]

Post-Compulsory Education and Training: a joint statement (October 1994) This statement from the majority of providers in the post-16 sector argues for 'a single structure for the assessment and accreditation of post-16 academic and vocational qualifications within a post-14 framework.'[2]

[1] *Choosing to Change: the report of the HEQC CAT development project*, Higher Education Quality Council, June 1994.

[2] *Post-Compulsory Education and Training: a joint by the Association for Colleges, the Girls' Schools Association, Headmasters' Conference, Secondary Heads Association, the Sixth-Form Colleges Association, The Society of Headmasters and Headmistresses in Independent Schools* (October 1994).

Defining terms

We have attempted to avoid unnecessary jargon. However, we do contend that a lack of clarity about some key concepts and the fact that key words convey different meanings to different parties, have hindered agreement about what needs to be done and have prevented full advantage being taken of what has been agreed.

Therefore, some 'defining of terms' is necessary, and different stages of the argument need to be distinguished from one another. The following paragraphs describe these stages as succinctly as possible, shorn of the rationale and explanations which are provided later in this paper. Each time a key word or phrase is introduced, it is printed in bold.

1. It is possible and helpful to define all awards, whether labelled 'academic' or 'vocational', in terms of the required **learning outcomes**.
2. A **unit** is a coherent set of learning outcomes.
3. It is important to distinguish between a **unit** of learning outcomes and a **module** of delivery, which is a sub set of a learning programme (such as a course of lectures, a work experience placement, or a project). For simplicity, one module is often designed to deliver one unit, but too rigid a relationship between modules and units can inhibit flexibility and responsiveness. (See also page 14.)
4. While it is desirable for **local** providers of education and training to have considerable autonomy over the design of modules, agreement at a **national** level, about the content of units promotes their currency and underpins standards.
5. There will remain a need for providers to be able to accredit achievement which is not encompassed within national qualifications. They therefore need to be able to develop their own units in these cases, adopting a common approach.
6. If good and common practice is adopted with regard to the way in which units are specified, it becomes possible to compare and contrast them in an understandable way and, in particular, it is possible to ascribe a **size** and a **level** to each unit.
7. The size of a unit is defined in terms of the number of learning hours required (on average) to achieve the outcomes. (This is purely **notional time**, in that a learner may take as long or short a time they require.) The level of the unit is determined by comparison with a set of agreed **level descriptors.**
8. On the basis of the three factors — explicit learning outcomes, agreed size and agreed level, — it is possible to agree the **credit value** of a unit. In the FEU system, a 30-hour unit at level three has a credit value of one at that level, a 90-hour unit a credit value of three at that level, and so on.
9. When a group of practitioners or institutions agree a credit value for a unit they should also specify the **context** and **purposes** for which that value is recognised.
10. **Whole qualifications** can be given an estimated credit value or **credit rating**, based upon the size and level they are designed to be. As experience in subdividing them into well written units increases, we find that not all of them match their intended size and/or level. This can provide useful feedback for the designers.
11. The **award of credits** to individual students can only be made by officially recognised awarding bodies, and requires that these bodies assure themselves that appropriate assessment procedures have been correctly applied to the learners' performance.
12. FEU is now in a position to give advice on good practice with regard to the specification and interpretation of outcomes, level, size, and the related credit values.

In each case reliability of interpretation depends on a clear *written definition* supplemented by *professional debate* between practitioners (in examiners' meetings, consortia, open college networks, etc.) and the availability where necessary of *exemplars*.

This three-pronged and pragmatic approach simplifies what is required in terms of the written definitions while producing a sufficient consistency for practical purposes.

Summary

This whole approach is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Each of the paragraphs above represents a stage of development which has value in its own right. The approach can be applied to some areas of the system or the country before others and some may move more quickly through the stages of development than others.

The framework which FEU is proposing provides for all achievement and awards to be described in terms of its component units. For each unit, the following can be agreed via appropriate procedures:

- a title
- learning outcomes statements
- assessment criteria
- level
- size
- credit value (based on the other features)

We invite comments on these proposals.

Geoff Stanton
Chief Officer
January 1995

Some individual colleges have agreed credit values which are recognised for internal progression and records of achievement only. Groups of colleges, e.g. in Wales, have endorsed credit values which have considerably wider currency, both geographically and in the uses to which they are put. In general, the wider the recognition, the more potential benefit there is to the student but for their sakes it is important to be clear about the limits which apply to recognition.

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SECTION 1: A COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The case for a common framework

FE provision is very diverse. Up to a point, this is all to the good. The clients of FE are equally diverse in their talents, ambitions and previous attainments. They need provision which matches their needs and their circumstances. Their circumstances include learning which may take place in the workplace or in the community, as well as in college or school, and learning which may be part-time or intermittent, as well as full-time on structured courses.

The provision of education and training has two elements:

- the availability of courses and other learning opportunities ('programmes');
- systems to assess, record and recognise achievement (whether whole qualifications or part awards).

The interests of the learners are usually best served if local providers have the freedom and flexibility to design programmes which reflect local circumstances. On the other hand, it is beneficial if qualifications can have wider currency: the learner may need to have the value of what they have achieved recognised nationally as well as locally and, for instance, by employers as well as universities.

Historically, there has often been too rigid a connection between learning programmes and qualifications. The necessary standardisation of qualifications has sometimes produced inflexible learning programmes. Conversely, the need for programmes which focus on different types of and contexts for learning has produced what has been called a confusing jungle of qualifications.

Work in which FEU has been engaged for the past few years has demonstrated that a better balance can be achieved between such elements as:

- diversity *and* coherence;
- local flexibility of provision *and* recognition of national standards;

if the distinction between programmes and qualifications is better understood and if both programmes and qualifications are subdivided. The sub-divisions can vary in size, depending on the circumstances of the learner and the nature of the subject matter.

We propose that the subdivision of a learning programme should be called a 'module', and that the subdivision of awards[4] should be a 'unit'. We argue that modularisation should be a matter for local decision, while the unitisation of awards should take place according to a protocol which is common across the country and across different qualification and award systems.

We have drawn on the best practice in both vocational and academic provision, have been advised by thoughtful and imaginative groups of practitioners, and have sponsored or monitored a wide range of field trials. We believe that the approach which is emerging has the potential to

[4] The term 'award' is used to include whole and part qualifications, and also recognition of achievement which may fall outside national qualifications.

overcome some traditionally intransigent problems, to enhance current developments and policies, and to do this while protecting standards and diversity.

This paper therefore attempts to draw together the work which has taken place up to this point, promoted by other bodies as well as FEU. It is supplemented by the Framework Guidelines and other papers (see the Conclusions).

A basis for a common framework

The first step towards striking the right balance between coherence and diversity, as far as qualifications are concerned, is to define every award in terms of units. A unit is a coherent set of learning outcomes. These describe what the learner has demonstrated that they know, understand and can do. Each unit can be ascribed a level and a size.

Behind this approach is the recognition that the value of what an individual has learned, both to themselves and others, is represented by some combination of:

- what they have demonstrated they know, understand and can do (the LEARNING OUTCOMES achieved);
- the degree of complexity, learner autonomy and required range of their achievements (the LEVEL of the unit);
- the amount of achievement (the SIZE of the unit).

An award is a means of recording and reporting on these three factors. Awards vary in the relative significance they give to learning outcomes, level and size. To some extent this is because of the different uses to which different kinds of qualifications are put, but there is also a degree of historical accident involved.

Any existing award can be analysed into units. Some, e.g. NVQs and GNVQs, already describe themselves in these terms; others do not. If they do not, the comprising units can nevertheless be deduced from an examination of syllabuses, past papers and examiners' reports. Among awards that do describe themselves in terms of units, differing means of doing so are in use. Harmonising the way in which units and their component learning outcomes are defined in different systems would bring many advantages.

TERMINOLOGY *A QUICK LIST*

Credit framework: *a set of specifications for describing and comparing achievement.*

CATS: *Credit Accumulation and Transfer Systems*

Learning outcomes: *what a learner can be expected to know, understand and do.*

Assessment criteria: *statements of more specific learning outcomes*

Unit: *a coherent set of learning outcomes (of any size)*

Module: *a subset of a programme of delivery (of any size).*

Size: *the extent of learning represented by the notional learning time required to achieve the unit expressed in hours.*

Level: *degree of complexity, learner autonomy and required range of achievement of unit derived from agreed level descriptors.*

Credit value: *the value of a unit based on the agreed learning outcomes, size and level. It is expressed as the notional learning time divided by 30 hours. The context and purpose of the valuation should be stated.*

Credit rating: *overall estimated value of the whole qualification, or associated units, based on the intention of the designers rather than analysis of learning outcomes.*

Credits:*based on credit value and awarded to learners for the achievement of units by appropriate awarding bodies, when appropriate assessment procedures have been followed.*

Aggregate credit value: *a total value based on a combination of one or more of the following: credit values, credit ratings or actual Credits awarded.*

The benefits

The benefits are multiplied if every unit has its size and level identified. For instance, even within the same award, it is possible and sometimes necessary for units to vary in size and level. Students, teachers and guidance workers all need to be clear about the nature of these variations.

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FEU has been developing and testing specifications for the definition of units, their level and their size. Together these provide a framework which has immediate utility for:

- the planning and implementation of learning programmes;
- guidance;
- establishing a basis for the kind of general equivalences between qualifications required for a number of purposes (e.g. when national targets or admission requirements dictate that a GNVQ 3 is equivalent to two GCE A levels.)

The FEU framework always enables the relative level and size of units to be shown. However, it is also possible to group units according to the nature of the learning outcomes they represent. Depending upon how this is done, this can have a number of uses. For instance:

- if units are grouped according to the area of learning they represent then we can get an indication of what is required to produce a balanced curriculum;
- if they are grouped according to learning sequence, we can see which units are prerequisites of others;
- if they are placed in order of cost of delivery, then resource implications can be shown;
- if units which are common to different qualifications are indicated, this shows the possibilities of transfer between them.

The framework can also show how learners can combine qualifications in a sensible way; how aspects of the same learning can be used to obtain different qualifications; and how elements of different qualifications might be taught together cost-effectively. It enables teachers and learners to define additional units which recognise learning not reflected by existing national qualifications, thus improving both motivation and progression to mainstream provision.

Most importantly, the ability to describe existing national post-14 qualifications according to a common convention has the potential to bring about a similar level of public understanding to that which the National Curriculum makes possible pre-16. The FEU framework does this while preserving diversity and choice. It describes important differences, rather than removing them. It can avoid the stereotyping which leads to an 'academic-vocational divide' by showing real, as opposed to imagined, differences and similarities.

It is also possible, based on the learning outcomes, size and level of a unit, to give it a **credit value**. This may be used to negotiate the general equivalences mentioned earlier, for specified contexts and purposes. The credit value also provides a basis for the **award of credits**, subject to quality assurance of assessment procedures by recognised awarding bodies. (See page 13).)

Summary

The framework which FEU is advocating provides for all achievement and awards to be described in terms of the units of which they are composed. For each unit, the following can be agreed :

- a title
- learning outcomes statements
- assessment criteria
- level
- size
- credit value (based on the other features)

If machinery existed for all these features to be validated at a national level and for national definitions of the content and purposes for which the credit value was valid, then a national credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS) would have been developed. It is already the case that titles and outcomes are endorsed by National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the School Curriculum Assessment Authority (SCAA) with regard to certain national qualifications and some local agreements exist with regard to the other features. However, a full and comprehensive system does not yet exist.

The framework can help the efficient progression of learners not only from one route to another in the FE phase, but also from the National Curriculum to FE, and from FE to HE. To use an analogy, it converts what was a series of parallel ladders, with occasional, inter-connecting planks to a complete climbing frame.

Learning outcomes

The learning OUTCOMES of a unit should be specified (where they do not already exist) in a manner similar in principle to that adopted for NVQs and GNVQs. This involves a common convention for specifying what the learner has to be able to know, understand and do, together with assessment criteria. It is further proposed that the consistent interpretation of the written definition should be supported by the use of exemplars and by networking between practitioners (via such devices as examiners' meetings, college consortia and open college network panels).

This goes beyond NCVQ's requirements but enables the written definition to be kept succinct and relatively straightforward. FEU is producing guidance on good practice for the writing of such learning outcomes. (see *Framework Guidelines 2: Learning Outcomes, Units and Modules*, FEU,1995).

Unit specification

Title

Learning outcomes statements

Assessment criteria

Level

Size

Credit value (based on the other features)

Levels

Within the FEU approach, units are allocated to one of eight LEVELS, the first of which, the'Entry' level, corresponds to a limited range of basic skills, knowledge and understanding and what was previously Open College Network (OCN) level 1 . The first three numbered levels correspond to NVQ levels 1 to 3 and their academic equivalents. Subject to current consultations on the possibility of a common credit framework within HE, it might be appropriate to regard levels 4 to 6 as corresponding to levels 1 to 3 within the widely-used HE CATS system, with level 7 corresponding to postgraduate level and professional qualifications. (See *Framework Guidelines 1: Levels, Credit Value and Award of Credits*, FEU,1995).

As GNVQ levels 1 and 2 are already equated in general terms with GCSE grades, this means that the system of levels which FEU proposes is relevant from the start of Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum, i.e. the age of 14.

FEU has already produced working descriptors for the four levels, Entry, 1, 2 and 3, and experience shows that these are good enough to allow experienced practitioners to ascribe levels consistently, as long as the possibility of networking exists, and if exemplars are available when required.

Size

The SIZE of a unit can be ascribed by a group of practitioners in a similar way, by estimating the number of hours on average a learner will require to achieve the specified learning outcomes — the notional time.

The National Open College Network has now adopted the level names, 'Entry, 1,2 and 3' to align with the development of this framework.

Credit value and the award of credits

As a result of the debate and development work which have followed its earlier publications, FEU has become aware that the word 'credit' can be used in a number of different ways. Those experienced in this field are used to handling these differences, but others can be deterred by what they perceive as ambiguities, or can misunderstand what is being claimed.

For instance, the fact that credit value is linked with notional learning hours has caused some to conclude that the FEU proposal values the size of a unit over its other characteristics. There can also be confusion between the ascribing of credit to a unit (or a whole qualification) and the award of credits to a student. 'Credit transfer' is a related but different usage (and 'training credits' means something entirely separate!)

FEU seriously considered using different terms. However, this could have caused some to think that we were changing our approach to some key concepts, and in any case would have ignored the extent to which the term 'credit' was already well-established. It was therefore judged best to confine ourselves to some tidying up of terminology in the following ways.

It is useful to distinguish between:

- the ascribing of **size** to a unit (in terms of notional learning hours), and
- the ascribing of a **credit value** which, although related to the size of the unit, (in that it corresponds to notional learning hours divided by 30) also signifies that the level is agreed and that the outcomes are properly specified.

The credit value will be recognised by a defined group of users or institutions for defined purposes. It is possible for a group of institutions to agree about the size of a unit (for timetabling purposes, for instance) without all of them agreeing to recognise its credit value, or without agreeing it for all purposes. It is for this reason that we recommend that the **context** and **purpose** for which the value is recognised should be stated.

If a learner achieves the outcomes of a unit with a credit value of (say) 3, he or she can only be **awarded** that number of **credits** if an awarding body is satisfied that proper assessment procedures have been followed, and if it decides to issue certificates of this kind.

Some national qualifications further require that the units the learner has achieved embody the requisite national 'standards', as agreed by NCVQ or SCAA. Other awards simply require that the unit has been checked for coherence and clarity.

If the units achieved by a learner justify the award of (say) 36 credits at level 3, then this indicates the general extent of their achievement. These credits might be gained via (say) two GCE A-level passes, via a GNVQ 3, or via an Access course for adults. Thus credits provide a currency through which to express these equivalences, in a way which might be appropriate for such things as meeting university matriculation requirements, being awarded a National Diploma, or reaching the shortlist for a job.

For instance, the following credit values are proposed for debate:

1 GNVQ Unit (at any level) = 3

12 GNVQ Units at level 3 = 36

1 A level = 18 at level 3

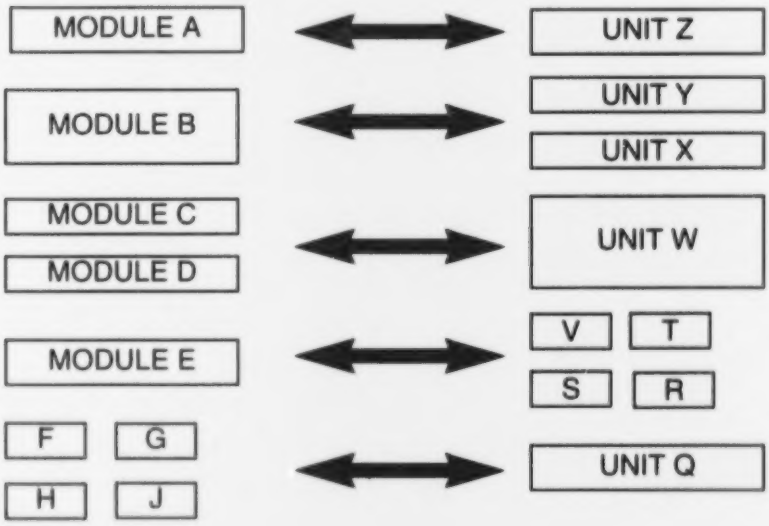
1 GCSE = 5 at level 2

Credits can only be awarded if some explicit outcomes have been achieved at the level in question. It remains possible to specify further the particular outcomes required by identifying some named units which need to be obtained. Sometimes both an overall number of credits and some specific units will be required: for example, when applying for admission to a general humanities degree. On other occasions, e.g. recruitment to some well-defined jobs, only the required units may need to be identified.

Units and modules

Throughout we have been referring to UNITS as coherent sets of LEARNING OUTCOMES. This says nothing about the way in which learners may acquire these learning outcomes. The unitisation of qualifications does make the MODULARISATION of delivery easier, but it does not require it. (See also *Framework Guidelines 2: Learning Outcomes, Units and Modules* and *Unitisation, Modularisation and Flexibility,: a credit-based approach* FEU, 1995).

All delivery can be said to be modular to some extent. The modules may be large — as in the case of a full A-level programme subdivided into just three subjects — or small, as in the case of delivery of most NVQs. In some cases, separate delivery modules may exist for each unit of learning outcomes. However, in others, a larger delivery module may be designed to prepare learners for the achievement of several units, if that is preferred.



The relationship between units and modules is flexible. The outcomes of a unit may be reached through a single module. Alternatively, they can be reached through two or more module,s or one module can contribute to achievement of a number of units. For example, a work experience module could contribute to a vocational unit, and to units in Communications and Maths. Many permutations become possible.

It is also possible to assess an individual's ability to make links between the learning outcomes of different units, by designing an overarching unit which makes this assessment. By definition, this overarching unit can only be assessed following the delivery of the earlier units. Other units may be assessed en route and/or assessment may be delayed until the end of the whole programme. Once again, this is a matter of choice. The framework itself is **neutral** on these matters, as it is with regard to:

- permissible combinations of units for a given qualification;
- the kind of evidence required to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes (course work, external exams, observation of performance, etc.);
- whether units have to be acquired via certain learning processes.

Just as there is a need for coherence to be balanced against the need for diversity, so there is a need for both national standards and local flexibility. Therefore, recognised units embodying national standards should be used wherever possible but providers should be free to design modules of delivery to suit local circumstances. They may choose to share the design of such modules with other providers, but that would be their choice.

Summary

- the size of a unit should be expressed in terms of notional learning time in hours;
- the credit value should be expressed as that number divided by 30, and implies a willingness to recognise the scope and level of achievement represented by the unit;
- the context and purpose for which the value is recognised should be specified;
- the achievement of an individual can be recognised by the award of credits;
- the general level and amount of achievement required for given purposes can be specified in terms of the total number of credits required at specified levels; the need to achieve particular learning outcomes can be specified in terms of required (named) units.

SECTION 3: NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS, OPEN COLLEGE NETWORKS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FRAMEWORK

National qualifications and Open College Networks

Some (but not all) national qualifications are designed to have a general equivalence to one another in terms of the scope and level of the demand they make of learners. Thus, most GCE A levels are intended to be equivalent to each other in this way, and a 12 unit GNVQ 3 is intended to be equivalent to two GCE A levels. In other words, these qualifications are intended to have the same credit value at level 3, and FEU is working with practitioners to identify and recommend what these values should be.

These might be called 'design values' since they do not derive from a detailed analysis of the component units. When this analysis is undertaken, differences of level and size can emerge. This can produce a basis for useful feedback to the qualifications designers. It does not mean that qualifications intended to be similar should be given different credit values, rather work can be done, if necessary, to equate qualifications intended to be similar.

In a number of places, including Wales, practitioners developing a framework have made use of the existence of OCNs to create a system by which practitioners can meet to ascribe levels and sizes to units. The same system has been used to identify units, where these are not explicit within existing qualifications (e.g. GCE A levels), or to create new units where learning has taken place for which recognition is not available within national qualifications.

OCNs and Access consortia also provide a means of recognising such otherwise unaccredited achievement. This can be particularly valuable for adults and can provide a motivation to move on to national qualifications.

It needs to be emphasised that, wherever possible, and in the interests of the learners as well as government policy, existing units embodying standards recognised nationally by NCVQ or SCAA should be used as they stand. Any recommendations for amendment should be reported to the relevant accrediting body.

The development of a framework

The FEU approach can support the consistent and accurate implementation of existing qualifications to national standards since it provides, in all cases, for the definition of and interpretation of units to be arrived at through a combination of:

- succinct written definitions of learning outcomes;
- exemplars of appropriate performance or products;
- networking which allows practitioners to test and develop their common understanding (through consortia, examiners' meetings, etc.).

Largely for historical reasons, some existing qualifications emphasise one of these three factors more than others. Thus, NVQs are more explicit about learning outcomes than are GCE A levels. Conversely, although NVQ assessors receive training in the interpretation of written specifications, A-level examiners benefit from more systematic networking.

Similarly, the three possible dimensions — learning outcomes, level and size — receive different emphasis in different qualifications and award systems.

For instance:

(a) **NVQ** units emphasise specific learning outcomes, but make no reference to level and size. Individual units may, in practice, differ in both these last two respects, even within the same qualification.

(b) **GCE A-levels** emphasise level of achievement. The total size of programme also matters but varies between A-level programmes taken by different students. Specific learning outcomes may vary even between different syllabuses with the same subject title.

(c) **GNVQ** units specify learning outcomes and size, and Advanced GNVQs (for example) are designed to equate to A levels in terms of level of demand.

(d) **OCNs** award credits at a level within a credit record which also gives details of learning outcomes.

The emphasis placed on each aspect varies according to the circumstances in which the awards are used; for example, entry agreements for some programmes are based exclusively on a minimum number of credits to be achieved at a particular level; for other programmes these specify numbers of credits at a particular level in particular areas of learning or for specific units.

Even where the qualification does not emphasise one dimension (for instance, the size of Units in the case of NVQs) providers of education — or funders of this provision — may be vitally interested in it. Placing the units within the framework allows their needs to be met, without distortion of the way in which awarding bodies choose to recognise achievement.

Where there is an agreement to assign a credit value to a unit, this implies not only that those concerned have checked its outcomes, level and size, it also signals that they are willing to recognise the currency of the credit for agreed purposes. Although this is not always done, FEU would argue that being clear about the content and purpose for which the credit value is valid strengthens its currency, as well as protecting the interests of the student.

Summary

The wider the understanding of what the credit value represents, and the more institutions that are willing to recognise it for appropriate purposes, the greater the potential benefits to the individual learner. That is why FEU is identifying and recommending common definitions and procedures, which could underpin a nationwide system.

The way in which the credit value and level of a unit or qualification will be expressed has yet to be agreed. It may be that awarding bodies will choose to incorporate these in the normal certificates issued; that credit values and levels for awards are registered, agreed and published nationally; that individual institutions will issue a transcript of the aggregate achievement of each learner. In the latter instance, such a transcript would not in itself be a certificate of achievement and would not usurp the role of awarding bodies.

In all this it is important to remember that the approach FEU is recommending provides common definitions and procedures for specifying the outcomes, level and size of units, as well as the resultant credit value. This means that the system also becomes more transparent and manageable in contexts and for purposes other than those for which credit values as such are relevant.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSIONS

The description of awards in terms of units of learning outcomes, each with an agreed size and level, improves the transparency of qualifications, and therefore student choice and progression. It also allows employers and other recruiters to base their decisions on clear information rather than stereotypes. Units and whole qualifications can be given credit values based on these features. The same approach can improve the planning and cost-effectiveness of provision.

Practitioners may create framework-type arrangements for local purposes without damaging or distorting national qualifications. However, if a common framework were adopted nationally, progress would be faster and several current problems (especially of linkage between systems) would be eased.

Different ways in which a common framework is useful includes:

- improving curriculum planning and implementation;
- enabling the breadth and balance of a programme to be assessed;
- providing a basis for internal or external resourcing of programmes;
- describing diverse provision in a way which is easier for students and employers to understand;
- improving guidance to students when choosing their programme;
- promoting 'credit accumulation' and 'credit transfer';
- measuring added value.

Key FEU publications

A Basis for Credit? 1992

A Basis for Credit — feedback and developments , 1993

Assessment issues and problems in a criterion-based system (1993)

Discussing Credit, 1993

A National Credit Framework: Curriculum Information Series briefing note 1993

The Catalyst Nos.1, 2 and 3, 1993/1994

Framework Guidelines 1: Units, Credit Value and the Award of Credits (Forthcoming 1995)

Framework Guidelines 2: Learning Outcomes, Units and Modules (Forthcoming 1995)

Unitisation, Modularisation and Flexibility: a credit-based approach (Forthcoming 1995)

The framework may have to be used in slightly different ways for each of these applications.

The approach being recommended is basically a very straightforward one, drawing upon the best practice available from a variety of systems. It is designed to be compatible with all of them. However, we must expect continuing problems of comprehension because terminology has been used ambiguously in the past, and because of the different traditions that exist. This paper and *Framework Guidelines 1 and 2* attempt to address this and other material will describe a variety of field trials and examples of implementation strategies.

The incorporation of all existing qualifications and provision within a common framework is nowhere near as difficult as were the creation of the National Curriculum or NVQs but would bring benefits at least as great as both.

Appropriate co-ordination of local activity, together with the agreement of national bodies to move in this direction as they revise and develop their systems, would enable this framework to evolve economically and without risk or disruption.